

**The  
Intercept\_**

# THE SANITIZING OF MARTIN LUTHER KING AND ROSA PARKS

Jeremy Scahill

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Photo: AP

A lot of the debate around black NFL players kneeling to protest police killings and racism seems to take place in a historical vacuum. The history of athletes and protest is seldom mentioned and, what's worse, the reason why Colin Kaepernick and his comrades began protesting during the national anthem has been

drowned out in the shouting. On #MAGA twitter, flooded in recent weeks with angry mobs calling for a boycott of the NFL, various images have been making the rounds depicting Martin Luther King Jr. with his hand over his heart in respect for the American flag. One photo was accompanied by a message saying MLK “didn’t take the knee in protest of the flag or the anthem, he took the knee in prayer to God.” It was followed by the hashtag #BoycottNFL.

Invoking King’s name on the right is nothing new – ahistorical versions of King have been used to defend gun ownership, racial discrimination, and the Republican Party. In this current climate surrounding the NFL protests, King has once again been transformed into a malleable symbol for rampant deployment by people trying to tell protesters and black people today to shut up. One of the biggest problems with all of this is that it is based on complete fiction and total ignorance of who King actually was and what he actually believed. It is also particularly vile when used to try to suppress protest against police killings.

The same pattern applies to Rosa Parks and her civil disobedience against segregation on public buses. It applies to the civil rights movement in general. Caricatures have been created after being sanitized, historically revised, and made palatable for mass consumption and abuse by crass politicians. It is these sanitized versions that are made into statues, given national holidays, and may one day end up on U.S. currency.

An important and groundbreaking new book coming out in January digs deep into this manufactured mythology surrounding King, Parks, and other figures and movements. It is called “A More



Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History.” Its author is Jeanne Theoharis, a distinguished professor of political science at Brooklyn College in New York. Her previous book, “The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks,” won an NAACP image award and other accolades. Theoharis joined us last week on Intercepted. Below is a transcript of the entire, unedited interview.



Intercepted with Jeremy Scahill

### Guns Before Country

Lobbyists, politicians and weapons manufacturers are the only beneficiaries of the massacre in Las Vegas.

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MEGAPHONE

**Jeremy Scahill:** Jeanne Theoharis, welcome to Intercepted.

**Jeanne Theoharis:** Thanks for having me.

**JS:** Before we get into some of these specific examples, I’m just wondering about your overall view of how key historical figures or moments in the civil rights movement are kind of used or inaccurately portrayed in our current discourse, either by politicians or by ordinary people having arguments online.

**JT:** I mean I think what we’ve seen, and this has happened over the past number of decades and I would argue since really Reagan changes his position and signs the King holiday, is the kind of creation of a national fable of the civil rights movement.

And so now the civil rights movement is used to make Americans feel good about themselves. You know, from 50th anniversary

commemorations of the March on Washington, to the Selma to Montgomery march, from the dedication of King's statue on the Mall, from the statue of Rosa Parks in Statuary Hall. All of these events have become places where we now celebrate the United States, where we feel so good about the progress we've made.

And I think in the process, these kind of dangerous ideas about what the civil rights movement was, what it entailed, how it went forth have become cemented. And so, as you're implying politicians, citizens, constantly invoke the civil rights movement in the present to justify certain kinds of positions, to chastise contemporary movements; whether it's Black Lives Matter, whether it's Colin Kaepernick's stand that has now turned into a much broader stand by athletes. We're constantly being bombarded with, "This is not what King would do." You know, "Be like King, be like Parks," that strip and utterly distort what the civil rights movement was and what people like King and Parks actually did and stood for.

**JS:** Well, in fact you had this meme floating around online, of Martin Luther King and one of his advisers, standing hand over heart in front of an American flag and the message there was, "Martin Luther King stood for the American flag, he's not like Colin Kaepernick or any of these other black athletes that are engaged in this."

**JT:** Right and you then we also saw the King Center and Bernice King tweet a couple weeks ago basically how unpopular Martin Luther King was. You know, what it took to be like him.

And then some of the comments, you may have seen this, to Bernice King's Twitter was literally like, "you're defacing the memory



of Martin Luther King,” and you’re like: do you know who this is? Like, do you understand?

I mean so this idea of what King was and who King was has completely become separated from like what the life of Martin Luther King was like and what particularly his political life from 1955 to his assassination, 1968, actually looked like, and what Americans thought of him at the time.

**JS:** Right, and we interviewed Tavis Smiley who wrote an excellent book about the last year of King’s life, where King was basically disinvited to everything. He was no longer embraced by the mainstream of the civil rights movement and he was increasingly denouncing US imperialism talking about how “my own government is the greatest purveyor of violence on earth.” It’s the one King quote that I would love to see at an NFL game, when they have all the rockets and the war craft flying over it. Let’s put that Martin Luther King quote up about the US government being the greatest purveyor of violence on earth.

**JT:** Absolutely, but I think we also need to remember that even the King at the high water mark of 1963, is not popular. So, in Gallup poll, the week before the March on Washington, two-thirds of Americans don’t support the March on Washington. You have Congressman denouncing it as un-American. And in the wake of the March on Washington, the FBI and the Kennedys, this is the moment when you see the escalation of surveillance of Martin Luther King, to kind of wall-to-wall surveillance of him. They call him a demagogue, the most dangerous. Even in this moment, right? We’re not even at ’67 King, with the public speech against the War in Vietnam, we are at King and the March on Washing-

ton, and that King is seen as dangerous and that King is surveilled. Right? It's not just '67 and '68 King.

**JS:** Let's talk about that King in the earlier 1960s, when the public figure of Martin Luther King became a hotbed issue for all kinds of debate and discussion. What were media outlets and sort of broader liberal society saying about the tactics that Martin Luther King and others in that movement were using?

**JT:** I mean, again, if you look at polls in the early 60s, most Americans do not agree. They don't agree with the Freedom Rides, they don't agree with the sit-ins, they don't agree that the civil rights movement is the way to go. They don't believe – again, with the March on Washington, there's this mob justice. They're constantly paranoid about violence. They constantly talk about violence, even though there's no violence.

I've been particularly interested, partly because of my own work, which focuses a great deal on the civil rights movement outside of the South, how King is received outside of the south. And if we look at how King, for instance, was received in California in the early 60s, and this is before 1965, Watts Uprising.

King is in and out of LA a number of times in the early 60s, including in 1964. In 1963, after much work and much civil rights activities, you see California pass a fair housing law, and white people go crazy, realtors go crazy. And they get on the ballot, Prop 14 in 1964, on the November ballot which is going to be the presidential election, and basically trying to repeal this law.

And King comes multiple times, right? There's a massive civil rights campaign in the state to try to keep the law and to vote no



on the proposition. And King is repeatedly called a communist, King is picketed, King is denounced for that work in California in 1964. And then we will see, white Californians by a 3:1 margin vote for Prop 14 in 1964, and they sent Lyndon Johnson back to the White House, but they, still, like in my home, I don't want any fair housing laws. And what King will call this is a vote for ghettos, right? Because that's what it's about.

And so, he's not popular in the north when he's talking about – I mean, he writes this really beautiful thing that most people have not read in the couple months after Watts, where he's basically like, "You invite me to your cities, and you sit up there with all this regalia, and you praise the actions of Southern black people, but, you know, when talk turns to condition local conditions, basically it's polite but firm resistance."

**JS:** Right, and I mean and Phil Ochs wrote that great song about this very phenomenon that you're describing called, "Love Me I'm a Liberal." And in one of the verses he says: "I love Puerto Ricans and Negroes as long as they don't move next door." Also, when King went north into Illinois, you had this famous incident in Cicero, Illinois where you had this white mob come out and they were physically assaulting King and his fellow marchers. And King was then blamed for bringing the violence into the Chicago area. And, in fact, King – you probably know the quote better than I do – but King's message after that was, "We only unmasked the violence that was there. And we didn't bring the violence."

And I feel like there was such an analogue to the times in which we're living now where black people who rise up to protest against the killing of black people by police are then blamed for

any police violence that takes place, whether it's in Ferguson, Baltimore, or places that we don't even know about.

**JT:** Right, right, and I think, again, repeatedly when King starts to talk about conditions, let's say in New York City, right? After the 1964 Harlem Uprising, King is talking about a civilian complaint review board, he's talking about needing to reform the police and New Yorkers won't want anything to do with that.

The biggest civil rights demonstration of the 1960s is not the March on Washington, it is a school boycott that happens in February 1964 here in New York City. After a decade of parents, students, civil rights activists have tried to get the New York City Board of Ed to come up with a comprehensive desegregation plan and they've continued to stonewall and say, "We don't, this is not a problem here." And we have committee after committee, and so, basically for a decade after Brown, nothing has happened in New York. And so finally, in February of 1964, they decide to have a school boycott. About 460,000 students and teachers stay out of school, so this is almost twice the number of the March on Washington.

A month later, in protest of this, about 15,000 mostly white mothers march over the Brooklyn Bridge in protest of a very modest school desegregation plan that the Board of Ed is floating: 15,000 versus 460,000. Pictures of that march, as my colleague Matt Delmont writes about in his book, end up being played over and over as Congress is debating Civil Rights Act. And one of the less talked about aspects of the Civil Rights Act, one of the things the Civil Rights Act does, is it ties federal money for schools to school desegregation. But northern and western liberal sponsors of the bill



write in a loophole for their schools, which is evident the time, Southerners are furious about this, that basically says school desegregation shall not mean, you know, having to change racially imbalanced schools. Because that's what Northerners call their schools: racially imbalanced schools.

And so, I think, over and over, you see northerners unwilling and angry and furious when sort of the lens comes on their own practices.

**JS:** Ok, fine, Martin Luther King was an unrepentant radical, I get that. But don't ruin Rosa Parks for people. She was a tired old seamstress who refused to give up her seat on the bus and it sparked an entire movement because she did that. Right?

**JT:** Right. Except, no.

So, Rosa Parks has this huge life, what she will call a life history of being rebellious, that really begins in her 20s when she meets and marries the person she describes as, "the first real activist I ever met." And that's Raymond Parks. They fall in love. They get married. And Raymond is working on Scottsboro. This is 1931.

Scottsboro is a group of young men, nine young men, ages 12 to 19, get arrested for riding the rails. Basically, they're riding the train for free. These are young black men. But in the midst of this arrest, police also discover, in a neighboring car two young white women doing this. And that charge quickly changes to rape. These young men are quickly tried and all but the youngest, who is 12, sentenced to death.

And so, this local movement grows in Alabama to try to prevent

the execution of these young men. And Raymond Parks as one of the local activists on the ground working on that movement. She meets him, he's doing that work, they get married in 1932, and she joins him.

By the 1940s, she's wanting to be more active. She's galled by the fact that black people are serving overseas in World War II and they can't register to vote at home. She wants to register to vote. So, she goes to a local NAACP meeting, she's elected secretary that very first day, she's the only woman there. And she will spend the next decade with one of Montgomery's most militant activists, a man by the name of E.D. Nixon, transforming Montgomery's NAACP into a more activist chapter. Working on issues of voter registration, and issues that we would consider criminal justice. So, two kinds of issues: both the wrongful accusations and convictions of black men and the unresponsiveness of the law to white brutality against black people, in particular, white sexual violence against black women.

So, she spent more than a decade, when we get to that day in 1955, working and trying and over and over and over, and largely they get nowhere. Most of these cases go nowhere. They can't get convictions or they can't even get indictments. She manages to get registered to vote because she tries over and over, but most black people in Montgomery don't and can't.

One of the barriers, I should say, I should explain, to voting is you have to take a test. But that test is different for white people than for black people. And so, she tries in '43 – it doesn't work. She tries in '44 – interestingly, that day, which almost never happens, she's there when two white women are there, she sees the voter



registrar to signal to the white women to wait until Rosa Parks finishes and leaves so she can help them. In 1945, she's angry. She's convinced she should register. So, she writes down all the questions and all the answers on her test, because she's thinking about filing suit. Now, just, where we are in history, this is ten years before she's going to make her bus stand.

So, the notion that Rosa Parks comes out of nowhere, you know, her feet are tired of, or this or that, bears no relation to Rosa Parks' actual life.

And then, Rosa Parks will spend the second half of her life fighting the racism of the Jim Crow north. Basically, Rosa Parks loses her job during the boycott, her husband loses his job, and even after the boycott's successful end, a year later, they still can't find work. They're still getting death threats.

And so, eight months later, they are forced to leave Montgomery and move to Detroit where her brother and cousins are living. And again, if you knew that she lived in Detroit, it often is talked about as kind of the last sense, and then, figuratively, she lived happily ever after. Except no! She will describe Detroit as the promised land that wasn't, and talk about how, while some of the public signs of segregation are thankfully gone, the systems of school segregation, housing segregation, policing, job discrimination are pretty much the same.

**JS:** How does this happen? Because it certainly has happened with Martin Luther King and it certainly has happened with Rosa Parks and it certainly has happened with the broader civil rights movement. Obviously it has been so drilled into peoples' heads that Rosa Parks was the tired seamstress who refused to give up her

seat; Martin Luther King was basically like, “let’s just all get along, I want my kids to be able to go in school in peace with white kids.” The civil rights movement, there was no violent response from the state, it was just some peaceful people who, through the battle of ideas, ended up winning.

What’s the origin of that, because I don’t believe – there has to have been some tactical decision made by people in positions of authority to revise this history.

Or is it just a collective sense of denial that then, you know, snowballs into this huge avalanche of bullshit? How did this happen?

**JT:** I think it happens in a number of ways.

So, I kind of began to locate this with Reagan’s flip-flop around the King holiday. Basically from the minute that King is assassinated, John Conyers introduces a bill for a federal holiday for Martin Luther King. A couple years later, the SDLC delivers a petition with three million names on it. No action from Congress. There’s huge resistance.

Throughout the 1970s, people are trying to get Congress to act. They won’t act. I think a couple things happened.

One, in trying to convince Congress, what you see is the images of King are getting more universalized. Right? So, Stevie Wonder writes the song, “Happy Birthday” King, right? It’s sort of how American King is.

Meanwhile Reagan, in 1983, he’s about to run again, he’s worried – he’s getting some criticism and he’s worried about keeping moderate white voters. And he comes to see the idea of signing



the bill for the King holiday as useful to show kind of how progressive he is. Right, and so this, I think, is a signal moment in terms of the realization, right? So up to this point, he comes in saying it's costly; he comes in saying he can't rule out that King was a communist. These kinds of things.

Then, in 1983, he doesn't veto the bill. And, I think, the change is he starts to see how this could be politically useful for him, and we start to see in the language that he uses this mythology about how the civil Rights movement, in many ways, proves how great America is. Or, so this idea that I talk about in my new book, of America as a kind of self-cleaning oven. Right? That the civil rights movement, we were destined to have a great civil Rights movement because we're such a great country. Right? And this just shows like all the progress we've made.

And I think we see a similar thing with Rosa Parks. Right? Both in the national funeral rehab for Rosa Parks following her death in 2005, less than two months after Hurricane Katrina, right? Why do we have a national funeral for Rosa Parks?

Partly it's to paper over those much more unsettling images from Katrina that are raising these questions of enduring racial injustice. And so, a funeral for Rosa Parks is sort of saying, "Look how far we've come, right? Look, look who we are! This woman who was denied a seat on the bus! Look, she's now in the capital, right?" And I think the ways the civil rights movement is now used as a kind of tale of American progress and it makes us feel good about ourselves.

And that reaches this apex with the election of Barack Obama. Right? There's all sorts of movement symbolism, right? And that

this is the dream being fulfilled. And there's a kind of feel-good nature to that. Right?

And I think there's a way that we all like to think we do the right thing and it's so hard to do the right thing. It is excruciatingly hard to act in the moment. It's excruciatingly hard to act again and again and again and again, which is what the story of the civil rights movement is. It's not: one day you sit down and then people rise up. It's like: you do it over and over and over for years, and then you get fired, and then you have to leave your home, and then you have to do it more, and you're super poor, and you, you keep fighting, and it's just, you know, and fighting and fighting for like 60 years of your life. That's Rosa Parks' story, right? It's not one day on the bus.

**JS:** And yet Rosa Parks is often cited as a personal hero of both Democrats and Republicans alike, even in the Republican presidential campaign, when Trump emerged victorious, in one of the debates, when they were talking about the \$20 bill. **JT:** Right. And so, I mean, in this sort of crazy, absurd moment, the second Republican debate, they get this question, "Who would you pick on the \$20 bill?" Trump, Rubio and Cruz all say Rosa Parks.

And you're like, "Wow!" I think that we'd be tempted to say, "They don't know who she is, right?" And I think that's absolutely true. But it's also like, how interesting that just sort of saying the name of Rosa Parks becomes politically useful.

I mean I think we saw that a few months ago. What did take to the Pope? He took first edition copies of all of Martin Luther King's writings. Right? An extraordinarily gorgeous present. I would like to take that to the Pope, too. Right? But, it's like Don-



ald Trump, whose policies sort of stand really against what King is writing about in those books, and yet there he is like trundling to link to the Vatican with his first edition copies of Martin Luther King. Right, so, the ways that it becomes politically useful to sort of say, look at the civil rights movement.

Or, three weeks before the election, Trump's lawyer, Michael Cohen, starts circulating this picture, that you may know, of Trump, Parks and Muhammad Ali, to prove that look he's not a racist. And it circulates, it continues to circulate through Twitter as proof that what white liberals are saying about Trump is wrong, because see, he's not a racist, see, look, there's Rosa Parks and Muhammad Ali with Trump, right? And the kind of use and invocation of the civil rights movement becomes a way to kind of prove people's bona fides – whether it's Trump or whether it's Hillary Clinton. Right, so?

They're all using her, right? She becomes, I mean Clinton does this really crazy thing during the campaign where she changes her logo to put Rosa Parks on it except that she puts Rosa Parks on the back of the logo and then Twitter erupts and it's hilarious. But it's just like the kind of use of these civil rights figures without dealing with their substance and what they ask of us today is a bipartisan phenomenon.

**JS:** Well and I, you know, we've all been hearing great things about this guy Frederick Douglass, more and more.

**JT:** More and more!

**JS:** He just seems to be doing great things. I mean, but that's, that's another example. You know Trump, Trump brings up, you

know, Frederick Douglass out of nowhere and clearly has no concept of who Frederick Douglass was or his writings. And yet, you know, once again using it as – I mean, he fumbled it tremendously there, to talk like Trump. But still he was, he learned that tactic. He didn't create that tactic, he's learned that tactic from a hell of a lot of white people who have done that for a long time in politics.

**JT:** Absolutely right. And that I think, and that he's doing it too, I think sometimes we sort of make him like some exceptional creature that doesn't partake in these things, but that's not actually true, right? So, this, from Reagan to Bush one to Bush two to Clinton to Obama to Trump, right, the use of the civil rights movement is kind of over and over taken on a way of making, of kind of elevating kind of our sense of selves and not taken seriously as what does it actually ask of us today.

**JS:** Your new book that's coming out in January is called, "A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History." Why the title? "A More Beautiful and Terrible History."

**JT:** So there's this, one of my favorite James Baldwin writings is this piece called, "The Talk To Teachers," and Baldwin talks about how America, American history, is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone's ever written about it.

And, in many ways, what I try to do in the book is sort of get us past this fable. Right? To a much more sober and fuller history and kind of what that shows us, right? And the ways that certain kind of gaps and omissions and how we understand the civil



rights movement deprive us of kind of what we need to know today about kind of where we've been and where we need to go.

And I think it's both a much more terrible history, it's a much more sober history. We don't look good. And it's also more beautiful history, because I think one of the things that, when you look at what people did and what it actually took, when you look at somebody like Rosa Parks, right? It's not one day, it's a lifetime, it's over and over and over, there's incredible hardship, there's incredible suffering. When you look at sort of, again, what people would do in this city, in New York City, around school over and over and over and over and over and over and over, we never get comprehensive desegregation in New York City ever. Right? It's a trick question I often start my classes with, right? Which is, "When does New York City desegregate?" And the answer is never. It didn't. New York City schools didn't.

So I guess why I wanted that title was both to suggest the ways – Tony Jett talks about how history needs to make us feel uncomfortable. Brian Stephen talks to us about how history needs to make us feel uncomfortable. And that uncomfortableness is both, right, it's not a history that makes us feel good about ourselves. But it's also a history that's tremendously powerful in terms of what people did and what people, and how people organized, right?

So I think, that's why I wanted those both – those two words that seem a little jarring, right?

**JS:** Yeah and it, I think it's a great title. I was just curious about the, you know, what is beneath it. As you're talking, too, it reminds me of what's happening right now with Dorothy Day, the

founder of the Catholic Worker Movement. You know, she had been a communist and then ultimately became an anarchist, pacifist, Catholic. She's up for canonization now. She's going to be a saint some day. George Bush cited her in a speech she gave it at Notre Dame, you know, because she said a lot of catchy things. And it sounds, oh, it sounds good, this saintly woman.

She was a militant! She was a complete radical who refused to participate in air raid sire, who put on the front page of the Catholic Worker newspaper after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, "Forget Pearl Harbor" as a response to the kind of collective reaction that we also saw after 9/11 when people were calling for blood.

I mean, as you tell these stories, I'm sure other people have their examples of it as they listen. But maybe you could give another example from the upcoming book of this kind of misuse of history that you're writing about.

**JT:** So one of the one of the things that made me crazy, last summer, as the protests after Philando Castile and Alton Sterling were killed by police and we see this upsurge of protests all around the country. And we see Atlanta's mayor Kasim Reed basically talk about how Atlanta is the home Martin Luther King, they believe in free speech. But then, to justify this massive police presence that we're seeing in Atlanta, but also all across the country, he says, you know, "Dr. King would never take a freeway." And you're like: What do you think the Selma to Montgomery march is? What – they're not marching in somebody's field. That's a freeway! Right?

This is what the civil rights movement was. It was disruptive. It was, it was meant to disrupt civic life, government life, commercial life. And the notion that the fact that protesters today are do-



ing similar things, one of the things that I find sort of ironic is all of this like, “We want you to be more like Martin Luther King.” This constant telling of young people, “Be like King, be like King.” And I think what this history shows is, “Be careful what you wish for.” Because, if, you know, what it means to be like King, right, is destructive protest. What it means is understanding that US domestic and foreign policy are linked. What it means is calling out not just sort of southern conservatives but northern liberals. What it means is making a moral and religious witness against racism and poverty and the interlinkages between those two in the United States. What it means is getting arrested over and over and over, thirty times, right? What it means is having to call out your allies. What it means is using a whole variety of strategies that people call violent, that are actually disruptive.

So when people say to young people be like be more like MLK, what I want to say is, “be careful what you wish for.”

**JS:** Well, and it does seem as though they think that you know King would have you know responded to the, take a knee protests by respecting the flag the American way on Sunday, which is to sit your fat ass down on your couch, with your chicken wings and your pizza and your beer and put your feet up on the coffee table and stay there during the national anthem, because that’s what’s happening in households across this country. It’s only when black people decide to take a knee and protest against this that it becomes completely uncouth, unacceptable, an insult to the troops. I mean this is a country filled with people who sit on their couch during the national anthem munching on nachos and eating junk food during the play of the national anthem and only seem to care about it when black people are doing it.

**JT:** I think to really look at ourselves, right, is a much harder thing. And I think one of the ways that the civil rights movement becomes so like useful in the ether, right, is that it allows us not to look at ourselves. Right? This fable of the civil rights movement and not the actual civil rights movement.

So King, the sermon King is going to give, is scheduled to give before he gets assassinated, he's called home, as any minister does, right, you put the sermon in the bulletin so it can be typed up. That sermon that he's supposed to give is called "Why America is going to hell." Or may go to hell, I can't remember the exact wording. Right? But he is talking about sort of that the United States has lost its way. Right? And again he's talking about foreign policy, he's also talking about poverty in this country, he's talking about the ways that we blame the poor for the kind of structures of racism and economic inequality. He's talking he's talking against this Horatio Alger idea that people can —

**JS:** Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.

**JT:** Right. So that I think that King, but that King demands something of us, right? Whereas like cuddly parade balloon King just only is like, you know, happy and cheerful and like just bobbing along with us. Right? And seems to just be like: let's all just hold hands.

And, again, if we think about the March on Washington speech, the first part of the March on Washington speech is about how the United States is given black people a bad check and they're there to collect. Right? It's a very different idea. Right? It's both about the need for restitution, right? The need for reparations. The need for material redress for what has happened, right? You



know that America signed a promissory note to black people and that they have, and we have defaulted on that and therefore people are there to collect that. That's a very different kind of, again, and this is King in '63, right? We're not king in '68.

I think sometimes people like are like, "Oh in '67 and '68 he got radical and people didn't like him." It's like, "No, people didn't like him in '63." Right, because, A. he was saying these thing sin '63, and then we missed and we just we turned that speech into the "I Have A Dream" speech when I think we should call it the "Bad Check" speech. JS: Given that you've spent so much time studying and digging into this history that you've been laying out for us, I'm wondering how you see this present moment. You know there's a lot of comparing what's called Antifa with neo-Nazi groups and these sort of these sort of neo-fascist groups. You have Trump putting, you know, overt white supremacists in key positions in the White House. Trump himself, really encouraging and enabling and emboldening really vile elements of society. But in a way, those elements are more reflective of the history of white people in this country than sort of the allies are. But I'm wondering how you see the protest landscape, and the way protest is talked about in the current time. And what should we look for, as – I mean, years later, people may look back and be able to pinpoint some key moments the way that you're doing with this history, but how do you see this moment that we're in now, informed by the work that you've done?

**JT:** I think the election of Trump and kind of what has ensued has been so sort of upsetting in terms of so many issues that there's a way to sort of treat this as just utterly exceptional. And I think one of the things that I've thought a lot about, and particularly

given that I've spent more than a dozen years sort of sitting with Rosa Parks' history, is really thinking about and being very mindful that like to treat this as exceptional, or to just feel so just beleaguered, when, again, the history of Rosa Parks is doing this year after year after year at moments when there is absolutely no sense that you're going to see change in your lifetime. Right?

So what that means to be Rosa Parks in the 1940s, or Rosa Parks in the 1960s. And then we might think about abolitionists in 1850, right? I mean 1850 is a horrible moment in this country in terms of the kind of re-upping of slavery, right? So, so the danger I think, and one of the things for me about this history, is to not exceptionalize this moment, and to see that partly we stand on the shoulders of people who have been huge long distance runners, right? And the need to be a long distance runner. And that it's not about a year or a couple years. Right? I mean I think that's one of the dangers of the Rosa Parks-Montgomery bus boycott story. Somehow it's like: she sits down, people rise up, and then things change. And that's just not what happens.

And so I think one of the biggest lessons that, that I have been thinking about and struggling with is not to feel so beleaguered in this moment and so like, "This is the worst thing that's ever happened in the history of ever." And to sort of see both the continuities with, you know, with like many moments in American history. And the continuities of, sort of, many of the people we admire and the kind of way that they summoned a courage over many years and many decades.

**JS:** This is sort of parenthetical, but there is this sort of rehabilitation going on among some Democratic pundits and activists and



others to rehabilitate the image of George W. Bush. I mean, just over the weekend, you know, there were a lot of people saying, “Well, George W. Bush, this wasn’t criminal activity that he was failing to take in New Orleans, like Trump’s is in Puerto Rico.” And I mean this is a guy who’s responsible for more than a million people killed around the world.

Of course race was at the center of how he responded to Katrina. But you have this kind of Russia stuff has united the neocons with the Hillary Clinton Democrats, in many ways, and part of it is the rehabilitation of George W. Bush. And I find that utterly despicable given what Bush did.

We’re not talking about like 1960s history here. We’re talking about just a few years ago, Bush and Cheney being in power, and it almost seems like a kind of parallel opportunism that exists in this current moment where the crimes of the neo cons are forgiven if they act like Trump is the exception and this moment that we’re living in is just unlike anything we’ve ever seen before in American history.

**JT:** Well I think that’s true of James Comey, too, right? I mean I think if we think about what the FBI has been doing since 9/11, and I think the inability to be able to hold two ideas in our hands, right? So that people can both be – and our ideas of racism, Right? Which has been so, and again in my new book, I talk about this phenomenon of kind of that we need to get beyond this idea of redneck racism or this kind of, that most racists were polite. Right? They didn’t spit, they didn’t burn, they used other means. They used political means, bureaucratic means, discursive means, sociological means, and to understand. But it’s much easier if

what racism look like is that people who burn and spit and take tiki torches, whether it's in Virginia this year or 60 years ago, then to reckon with a kind of much harder, right, concept of what kind of racism looks like or what racial injustice looks like. Or just right, like George Bush ...

Certainly he was more polite at moments, right? Certainly he understood a certain sense of responsibility of what it meant to be president. Certainly James Comey was, you know, loved Martin Luther King. One of the crazy things about James Comey, right, he loved Martin Luther King, he had the Martin Luther King letter on his desk. And yet, the same kinds of tactics, the same kinds of sort of blanket surveillance of Muslims, blanket surveillance of Muslim student groups, similar to what, you know what Hoover did in the 60s, right? And sort of the inability to see that our fears and our prejudices recur and then therefore our tactics recur and so like having the king letter on the desk is not enough to prevent the same kinds of assumptions to pervade the ways we conduct law enforcement.

**JS:** I mean isn't the same true also of the discussion about Trump and white supremacy. You know, I mean, you know having someone like a Steve Bannon or Stephen Miller in power and knowing what we know about them and their individual politics, it kind of creates a situation where the debate seems to be: Do we now have a white supremacist in power in the United States? Versus: Let's look at the entire history of this country.

I mean I am worried when I hear the debate around Trump and white supremacy, that it lets off the hook of the entirety of history that precedes Trump in the power structure in the United States.



**JT:** Right. And somebody like Bill Clinton. Right? Bill Clinton, sincerely, has black people as his friends, in his cabinet. And at the same time Bill Clinton had a devastating effect from welfare reform to the crime bill to the anti-terrorism death penalty. I mean in terms of the ways that Bill Clinton and his administration use images of people of color to drive incredibly repressive policies, right is a form of sort of white supremacy or racial injustice, whatever you want to call it. Right? And so to sort of separate or to sort of say, “What Trump is doing is completely unparalleled!” And not to sort of take stock of sort of what, as you’re saying, is a kind of like the history of the broad history of the states, or even the history of the United States over the past thirty years, I think misses sort of what we need to learn from this moment, which is maybe unleashing – there’s an unleashing in this moment, certainly, but it’s not that this is unprecedented or this is for the reappearance of white supremacy after like sixty years or something.

**JS:** Jeanne Theoharis, thank you very much for joining us on Intercepted.

**JT:** Thanks for having me.

Top photo: Mississippi highway patrolmen shove the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and members of his marching group off the traffic lane of Highway 51 South of Hernando, Miss., June 7, 1966.



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